

Suggested Remarks
Gerardo A. Porta, USAID/OEDG
First National Media Summit on Child Labor
Century Park Hotel, Manila
April 19, 2006, 9:00 a.m.

DOLE Undersecretary Luzviminda Padilla;
DepEd Undersecretary Ramon Bacani;
Ms. Elnora Avarientos, Executive Director of
the ABK Initiative and World Vision;
Friends and colleagues in development and
the donor community;
Ladies and gentlemen

Magandang umaga po sa inyong lahat.

I am delighted to join you this morning for
this National Media Summit on Child Labor,
and I congratulate the Pag-Aaral ng Bata
para sa Kinabukasan Initiative (ABK
Initiative) for organizing this important
event.

The U.S. Government believes that the elimination of hazardous forms of child labor is fundamental to the promotion and protection of children's rights. Our broad range of programs with our Philippine partners to combat child labor, fight trafficking in persons, particularly of women and children, and promote more sustainable and equitable growth all contribute to eliminating the circumstances that condemn children to a life of servitude and exploitation.

USAID/Philippines has a long history of collaboration with the organizations that make up the ABK Initiative. I fondly remember working in 1999 with colleagues from World Vision, Plan International, Christian Children's Fund and the Educational Research and Development Assistance Foundation under the Enhancing Children's Participation in Social Reform (ECPSR) Project to develop a focused and collaborative response to the problem of child labor in the Philippines.

I am both happy and sad to see that seven years after the birth of our child labor program the four organizations are still at the forefront of the fight against child labor. I am happy because it is plain for all to see from the ABK Initiative that their vigor, commitment and dedication to address child labor has not diminished. They have in fact merited additional support through a four-year grant from the U.S. Department of Labor that enabled them to continue their anti-child labor program.

I, however, can't help but feel a little sad because the very existence of the Initiative is confirmation that children continue to be employed and exposed to exploitative and hazardous conditions, forced to work long hours away from home, and deprived of their rights to health and education.

The policy and regulatory framework in the Philippines is very impressive. The government has ratified many United Nations conventions related to child labor including ILO Convention 182 on the elimination of the

worst forms of child labor, and the Convention on the minimum age for admission to employment among others. National-level policies that protect children from abuse and exploitation like Republic Acts 7610 and 7658 are in place together with ordinances in many localities that provide protection for children.

The persistence of child labor practices, including the banned use of children for hazardous work, however, suggest that the conventions, laws and local policies regarding child labor have yet to be fully implemented, and their implementation and impact carefully monitored. This is exacerbated by poverty, and the belief among employers of child labor that children are more docile, obedient, required in certain production tasks, hired at cheaper rates and expendable. Just as unfortunate, the deprivation of education that many child laborers endure virtually doom them to a life of poverty that also assures a steady supply of child laborers in the generations to come.

There is a need to call attention to the plight of children toiling in plantations, small mines, fireworks factories, sweatshops and fishing boats in the hope that leaders of government, civil society, business and the general public will listen and collectively act on their issues and needs. The media can have a very strong influence in this regard.

I remember an event in 2000 when I, together with the Labor Attache of the U.S. Embassy and representatives of the organizations that make up the ABK Initiative, visited Negros Oriental to talk to three child laborers who escaped from a muro-ami fishing boat off the waters of Palawan. The trip was a very real eye-opener. It put a human face on a very serious problem that up to that point I only read about in reports or heard about from other persons.

Each of the three young boys had a chilling story to tell. They narrated their ordeal in detail and told us about starting work

everyday by jumping into the sea at five in the morning and ending at six in the evening; being routinely beaten up everytime their "maestro" is not satisfied with their work; witnessing their companions dying from extreme exposure or accidents; being paid P4,000 only after 10 months of continuous servitude.

I can provide more tragic details but the point I am trying to make is that there is a very moving human interest story behind every child laborer that the media can highlight and bring to the public's attention. By calling attention to the sad plight of child laborers, media can help galvanize public consciousness against the practice of child labor and provide a powerful motive to fully enforce anti-child labor laws. Greater media exposure of the evils of child labor can develop in all of us a sense of outrage that will make it difficult for exploiters of children to continue their practice and get away with it.

Today, the ABK Initiative has undertaken another important step in encouraging media to be an important ally in the fight against child labor. We applaud your efforts and I am personally very happy to have this opportunity to reunite with old friends and partners.

To our friends in media, we are very grateful for the coverage you have given the issue of child labor in the past. May the inputs of this summit prove worthy of your precious time and motivate you even more to train the spotlight on child labor. Working together, we can finally win the fight against this reprehensible practice for the sake of Filipino children.

Maraming salamat po at mabuhay tayong lahat.